

Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON
Published: February 5, 2010

INKA ESSENHIGH

'The Old New Age'

303 Gallery

547 West 21st Street

Chelsea

Through Feb. 20

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The seismic success of the movie "Avatar" reveals a propensity for pantheistic belief throughout the industrialized world. Judging by Lisa Yuskavage's paintings of giant goddesses embedded in primordial landscapes, and now Inka Essenhigh's painted visions of enchanted forests, a ghostly coastal scene and a nature goddess passing among the trees, not all artists are immune to the allure of pagan myth and magic even if they approach them with tongue in cheek.

Made with a thin, dry, illustrative touch, Ms. Essenhigh's paintings lack the oleaginous sensuality and erotic fantasy of Ms. Yuskavage's paintings, but they have a similarly playful combination of humor and mysticism. Ms. Essenhigh's paintings have a sweet, childlike innocence; the painting of a black horse grazing in an incandescently yellow hayfield could be an illustration for a girl's picture book.

Updating Victorian fairy painting, "Green Goddess I" and "Green Goddess II" invoke the popular cult of the Gaia hypothesis, the modern equivalent to Mother Nature: a pretty young woman seems to float over the ground as her flowing and glowing green cape delivers life force to the world. In the show's one urban scene, "The Lower East Side," Ms. Essenhigh has transformed one of the hipper districts of Manhattan into something resembling a Dickensian mushroom trip.

Is Ms. Essenhigh expressing a sincere faith in some sort of neo-pagan nature religion or is she toying satirically with New Age cliché? Both: the life of her paintings is in the felt tensions between sophistication and naïveté and skepticism and belief. KEN JOHNSON

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